

## GRAD Connect

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**Abstract:** The University of Oregon Libraries Assessment Team partnered with a market research consultant to conduct focus group with graduate students to elicit information on their library experience and the support they receive from the libraries in their roles as students, researchers and teachers. We conducted non-traditional sessions that included story-telling, graphic facilitation, and brainstorming. Seventeen library faculty and staff engaged with sixty-four graduate students in 2.5 hour sessions. Through extensive, guided de-briefing we identified challenges and frustrations; positive affirmations of what is working well; and aspirations and “wish-fors”. Subsequent all-staff meetings focused on the aspirations: what the graduate students wanted if resources were not an issue. Some changes have already been implemented and the focus group results continue to inform library decision-making.

In January and February 2013 the University of Oregon Libraries conducted a qualitative research project with the objective of understanding and improving the graduate student experience at the University of Oregon. The UO Libraries' Assessment Team was charged with conducting a targeted user assessment during that year. We chose to focus on graduate students for four reasons:

- 1) LibQual+ survey results from 2005 and 2010 indicated to us that graduate students use the physical library as frequently as undergraduates and use the virtual library as frequently as faculty.
- 2) We had no existing advisory group for graduate students, unlike faculty and undergraduates who had standing committees which offered regular opportunities for formal feedback.
- 3) Growing the graduate student population was and is a campus priority.
- 4) Today's graduate students are tomorrow's faculty; this presented an opportunity to develop a better understanding of the perspectives on library services from this generation.

Once the Assessment Team decided on the target audience and the general strategy of conducting focus groups, Wendy Ames, a market research consultant, was hired to guide the process. The members of the Assessment Team had little or no experience with qualitative research and hiring the consultant also served a skill-building purpose. Working together we came up with the strategy of conducting several groups in the same place at the same time. That is, using a large room with eight conversations happening simultaneously rather than conducting separate sessions for each group. The energy created by this “big event” was a key element of the process.

GRAD Connect consisted of focus group sessions in three locations on different days. It included 2.5 hour non-traditional, graphically facilitated sessions at the main UO campus in Eugene and also at our branch campus in Portland; and a 1.5 hour roundtable discussion at the Oregon Institute of Marine Biology (OIMB) in Charleston, Oregon. Participants were provided lunch and \$50 campus cash cards as incentives. Recruitment was through library subject specialists, the Graduate School, and graduate student coordinators in each academic department. Initially we had a waiting list for participation, but late cancellations enabled us to accommodate everyone on the list.

During the main sessions (excluding OIMB) the students were divided by discipline into round tables set up in a large room. The decision to divide by discipline allowed for homogeneity within the groups – an opportunity to get more of a sense of shared experience - while the debriefing sessions to compare the data from each group allowed library staff to understand where there was commonality of experience and where there were disciplinary differences.

Ms. Ames served as the lead facilitator in the room, guiding the entire event. In addition there was a conversation leader for each table from the Assessment Team and a volunteer library staff member to serve as note taker for each table. Ms. Ames also provided the discussion guide for the rest of us to follow and conducted brief focus group training for the table group leaders. All together we had 64 graduate student participants and 17 library staff.

The graphic facilitation process included three exercises for each table to work through. The first was for each participant to work individually and select three to four images clipped from magazines to tell a story about their library experience. Each person then put their selected images up on the wall and explained their story to the group at the table. The note taker wrote each concept that came up on a sticky note and put the notes up next to the story images. Then each table group worked together to identify common themes that emerged in the stories – again with the note taker writing all the comments to the side. These themes were reported out to the room as a whole. The final exercise was to imagine if one had a magic wand and no limitations what would the students like library services to be. Each table worked together to draw a picture of what their ideal academic support system would be. They were provided plenty of magazine images, Play-Doh, colored markers, and other props to use in developing their picture. Each table then presented to the room what they had used their magic wands to create.

The GRAD Connect sessions were enlightening and energizing, but that was only the beginning of the process. Analyzing the qualitative data required a lot of follow-up work. Ms. Ames transcribed all the sticky note comments that went along with the images. She then led the library faculty and staff participants through a debriefing process that spanned several days, reviewing the textual notes along with the images. Specifically, for each disciplinary group we identified: Challenges and Frustrations; Current Sweet Spots; and Aspirations and Wish-fors. Then we looked across all of the groups to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

Finally, we focused on the Aspirations and Wish-fors to identify themes for library action:

- Website and discovery. Graduate students wish it was easier to understand what the UO Libraries have to offer and wish for tools that would help them intuitively search through the maze of both online and off-line resources that are available.
- More and different technology. Graduate students want the best technology available from the UO Libraries for their teaching and learning needs. There was a lot of disciplinary divergence on exactly what was needed, but there was a lot of convergence on a desire for site licenses for expensive software needed for their specific programs.
- Collections and resources. Graduate students wish for more media content and electronic resources. They also want full-text resources, textbooks, curricular material, and more tier-one journals. They want the library to end recalls. As we probed this issue it primarily relates to students trying to avoid the cost of buying textbooks.
- Access and hours. Graduate students want the UO libraries and their resources to be more accessible more often. The main library is open 24/5 but does not open until 9:00 am on Saturday and Sunday morning. The desire for early morning hours on weekends reflects needs that are different from most undergraduates. In Portland, the service hours were not in sync with the needs of part-time students who use the library after their evening classes end at 8:00 pm.
- Point-of-need help and more orientation. Graduate students want to more fully utilize all of the services and resources the UO Libraries have to offer. Though orientation is currently done at the beginning of the academic year by library subject specialists, the perception is strong that they are not quite getting what they need when they need it.
- Better study space. Graduate students wish for more study spaces in the UO libraries, and they would like these spaces to support their needs around studying effectively for long hours. They name desired attributes such as quiet, brightness and natural light, warmth, openness, privacy and security. Comments from graduate students who also teach indicate a desire for a space where they can do their own work away from interruptions from their students needing help with assignments.
- Relaxation space. Graduate students also wish for spaces that are relaxing, comfortable and can help them endure or cope with long periods of study away from home and/or family. There was also a strong desire for a communal space where graduate students would work together, relax and have a cup of tea, or bring their children in the evening.
- The broader campus environment for graduate students. There are strong wishes for more community engagement and more building of community/ social interaction amongst students, instructors and practitioners. Financial issues were frequently

mentioned – issues that the library was not necessarily expected to solve - but this did relate back to the possibility of helping with more copies of textbooks on reserve and site-licensing software.

These results were then taken to an all-staff meeting to brainstorm actions that could be taken to address the issues brought out in these themes. Some immediate actions were already in the planning stages and GRAD Connect served as additional input: bringing up a new ILS, redesigning our website, improving linking to e-books, and evaluating loan policies. We also began offering e-delivery of articles and chapters from our own collections to graduate students, a service we were already offering for faculty. New initiatives that came as a direct result of GRAD Connect included a deeper examination of access hours and technology offerings in branch libraries and creating a more structured means of information sharing with the Graduate School.

Our next steps will include looking at the results of the 2014 LibQual+ survey to see if there have been any significant changes in graduate student satisfaction; scheduling a meeting of our new Dean of Libraries with the Graduate Student Advisory Council; paying particular attention to graduate students' strong views on library space when engaging in facilities planning; and enhancing our Fall Term orientation efforts.

Overall the GRAD Connect experience was an excellent opportunity to learn more about user needs and experiences and an opportunity for our library staff to develop qualitative assessment skills. Information gained through this process will continue to inform library decision making for years to come.